

## Inspired English – Addressing Elementary School Teachers' Concerns towards Individual English Ability and English Teaching Methodology

Jerry MILLER  
Douglas GLOAG<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Although elementary schools in Japan will introduce English as a formal subject from 2020, studies have shown that most elementary school teachers lack confidence in their own English skills and in their ability to teach English effectively (Fennelly & Luxton, 2011). Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) provides materials but teachers need real, practical training before the new program begins in 2020. Present one-day seminars and special workshops are a positive step in the right direction. This study will show the clear benefits of a more structured course over four months focusing on both concerns – improving individual English ability and giving some concrete ideas on how to teach English as a foreign language. Teachers clearly felt this more intensive approach beneficial and it's hoped that this program can be repeated to a wider audience in the following years. It is also hoped that this low-cost study can be a model for university faculty that want to support the local community and make for a discussion on how to solve the concerns of teachers rather than measuring the level of worry among teaching staff.

Keywords: Elementary School English, Teacher Training, EFL, English Conversation

---

<sup>1</sup> 山形大学基盤教育機構

## 1. Background

Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) revised the national curriculum (Course of Study) in 2002 to allow elementary schools to introduce English as part of international understanding classes during the "period of integrated study". This new class would be held three times a week from the 3rd grade, but also included information processing, health and welfare and environmental studies, as well as international understanding. Local governments could choose the content of these classes though many used the international understanding class time for some form of English language activity. Some schools even introduced these integrated study classes in the 1st and 2nd grades. In 2008, there was another revision to the Course of Study which made English language instruction compulsory for 5th and 6th graders from 2011 (with pilot programs beginning from 2009). Structured English learning was not required. The classes were to focus more on enjoying and learning the basics of English in a relaxed manner. No grading or evaluation would be conducted and there was no recommended manual or lesson plans to follow. This was called 外国語活動 (Gaikokugo Katsudo), or foreign language activities, but invariably meant English and little time was given for any other foreign language education. The goal of this new curriculum was to help children experience and understand other languages and cultures, and nurture an inclination to actively communicate with others by becoming familiar with the sounds and basic expressions of another language. This leads to the reforms for 2020 when English, and not foreign language activities, will become mandatory for 5th and 6th graders along with designated textbooks and formal grading. Foreign language activities will now become mandatory for 3rd and 4th graders. A series of texts have, up until now, been introduced to elementary schools and their teachers. These include: English Note, Hi Friends, Let's Try, and We Can. These are primarily resource

books with lots of pictures and cut-outs to help improve students' vocabulary and basic English skills. Each textbook comes with a teacher's manual that gives ideas on how to use certain chapters and lessons but the onus is on the teacher on how they want to make use of these supplementary materials.

## 2. Methodology

The researchers both work at a public university in the Tohoku area and are involved in teaching a range of English classes across different ages and levels. One of the authors majored in Elementary Education and regularly teaches classes for teacher license renewal training 課程認定 (katei nintei) specializing in seminars for teachers working in elementary schools. The fellow author had experience teaching in numerous elementary schools in the Mogami area of Yamagata over the past 25 years, and has also had experience in giving seminars to school teachers at all levels. Before beginning this study, the researchers often discussed what they thought was lacking in the current system of elementary school English and/or training for teachers. This led to the creation of the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the English level of elementary school teachers?

RQ2: What EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teaching knowledge do instructors have concerning teaching students from grade three through six?

RQ3: What are teacher's thoughts about age/level appropriateness concerning content between different age groups?

In order to promote the pilot study, the authors visited Yamagata City's education department in city hall and the board of education in the prefectural office building. Leaflets were distributed to all schools informing teachers of the program outlined below. The principal of

one elementary school was consulted due to his connection with the Yamagata Elementary Faculty Development Group (FD). A short questionnaire (see Appendix) was sent out to all 41 teachers in the FD group and 27 teachers responded. It was learnt from these results that teachers showed strong interest in these three areas: Teaching Skill, English Ability, and Training. Through conversations with these teachers, the researchers realized that what teachers really wanted was to gain confidence in teaching English to their students. Over the course of the academic year, the FD group had several one-day seminars to learn about teaching ideas and share concerns about the new Course of Study. These were very beneficial but teachers wanted more consistency, feedback, and chances for personal English improvement. With this in mind, a skills list and teaching methods list were devised:

#### Skills List

Introductions  
 Asking for Help  
 Shadowing  
 Directions  
 Instructions  
 Interacting with the ALT  
 Talking about School  
 Talking about Japan  
 Small Talk  
 Cultural Differences

#### Teaching Methods List

Classroom Language  
 The Communicative Lesson Plan  
 Warm-Up Ideas  
 Introducing the Topic  
 Listening Activities  
 Picture Books and Stories  
 Total Physical Response (TPR)  
 Drills and Fluency Exercises  
 Teaching Vocabulary  
 Phonics and Pronunciation

These 20 classes, focusing on both individual English skills and teaching methods, were offered to participating teachers. Participants could attend as many lessons as they pleased. A week-day evening (Tuesdays, 18:30-20:00) and weekend morning

(Saturdays, 09:00-12:00) were chosen to hold classes, and all classes took place on the Kojirakawa Campus of Yamagata University. All classes were held free of charge. Language classes were pressure-free and teaching methods were introduced and discussed to help tailor each activity to individual personalities and school sizes.

### 3. Discussion

Initially, skills lessons were planned for Tuesdays while the 'double' class on Saturday mornings would be a chance to introduce teaching methods with many opportunities for practical training and feedback. In reality, few teachers were able to make the Saturday classes so all Tuesday classes became a fluid mix of English skills coupled with teaching methods and feedback. Many of the classes tended to focus on useful classroom English phrases, different warm-up activities, and total physical response activities. Overall, 17 classes were held. Participation varied but a core of six teachers attended regularly.

It was effectively very difficult to answer any of the proposed research questions due to the fact that there was no regular attendance by enough teachers to make any firm observations. The materials and ideas offered were very positively received by those that did attend, and most teachers were quite comfortable in the all-English environment created by the researchers. This initial program not only gave much to reflect upon, but also a number of promising ideas moving forward.

Reflecting on the research questions above, the following speculative claims can be made. Regarding the English level of elementary school teachers, there was a wide range in communicative ability. Most teachers had the basic foundations of English with the younger teachers being more confident and capable. However, even lower level English speakers showed a strong willingness to communicate. As far as EFL knowledge was concerned,

there was an evident lack of understanding about methodology, content, and activities that would be appropriate for a particular grade. This is most likely due to the fact that many elementary school teachers did not receive any EFL training in university or graduate school. Teachers were originally at a loss over how to create similar activities for different age groups. Over time however, they learned how to adapt activities to make them easier or harder depending on the level they were teaching. Clearly, additional training is required in the areas of English communicative skills and lesson planning.

#### **4. Limitations**

As this was the first year of a long-term project, all findings should be viewed as preliminary. There is typically very little communication between university and elementary schools, and yearly scheduling is also very different between the two institutions. Finding the perfect time slot for everyone proved very difficult and getting the same teachers to come week after week was also a major challenge. Teachers are busy in both their personal and professional lives, and even though they feel overwhelmed with future English classes, they are also consumed with their day-to-day duties. Another possible reason for the lack of attendance could be due to the fact that the classes were offered for free and thus the individual didn't feel the same incentive to go as if they had paid for the program. All of these aspects will be reviewed for the commencement of a similar program next academic year.

#### **5. Conclusion**

As an initial attempt to raise the level of elementary school teachers, this project gave the researchers valuable information as to what works in reality, in contrast to what was presumed to work during the planning and design phase. The feedback concerning materials and ideas that were presented was extremely positive.

Therefore, the basic concept of striving to improve teacher's English skills, while simultaneously offering training in teaching methodology is still a viable research theme. Although concerns of participation and teachers' daily schedules need to be addressed, future efforts will continue to provide hands-on training that gives elementary school teachers the self-confidence and know-how to succeed in the classroom.

### Notes

This paper is based on a presentation given at the JALT National Conference in Shizuoka in November, 2018.

### References

- Aoki, M. (2016, September 5) English heads for elementary school in 2020 but hurdles abound. *The Japan Times*, Retrieved from <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/>
- Fennelly M., & Luxton, R. (2011) Are they ready? On the verge of compulsory English, elementary school teachers lack confidence. *The Language Teacher* 35.2 19-24.
- Fukuda, T. (2010, June 29) Elementary schools to get English. *The Japan Times*, Retrieved from <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/>
- Kusumoto, Yoko (2008) Needs Analysis: Developing a Teacher Training Program for Elementary School Homeroom Teachers in Japan. *Second Language Studies*, 26(2) 1-44.
- MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) English Education Reform Plan Corresponding to Globalization. Retrieved from [http://www.mext.go.jp/en/news/topics/detail/\\_\\_icsFiles/afieldfile/2014/01/23/1343591\\_1.pdf](http://www.mext.go.jp/en/news/topics/detail/__icsFiles/afieldfile/2014/01/23/1343591_1.pdf)
- MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) Shougakkou gakushu-shidou youryou Retrieved from [http://www.mext.go.jp/component/a\\_menu/education/micro\\_detail/\\_\\_icsFiles/afieldfile/2018/09/05/1384661\\_4\\_3\\_2.pdf](http://www.mext.go.jp/component/a_menu/education/micro_detail/__icsFiles/afieldfile/2018/09/05/1384661_4_3_2.pdf)

## Appendix

### 英語指導についてのアンケート

私たちは先生方の英語指導を微力ながらサポートしていきたいと考えています。そのため、ご面倒をおかけしますが以下のアンケートにできるだけ率直にお答えくださるようご協力願います。尚、このアンケートは無記名で結構です。

回収したアンケートは集計し、私たちがどのような分野で先生方をサポートしていけるか理解を深めていくために役立てていくつもりです。2月28日までに下記アドレスに添付ファイルで送付して下さい。

[java@e.yamagata-u.ac.jp](mailto:java@e.yamagata-u.ac.jp) (ミラー・ジェリー)

それぞれの項目で5から1まで最もよく当てはまるもの一つに○を付けてください。

5 = 強くそう思う    4 = ややそう思う    3 = どちらともいえない  
2 = あまり思わない    1 = 全く思わない

1. 私は自分の学級で英語を教えることが楽しいと感じている。
2. 私は自分の英語に自信を持っている。
3. 私は英語のレスンプランを立てるのが得意である。
4. 私は自分自身の英語能力を向上させたいと思う。
5. 私は自分の授業について他の先生と検討し合いたいと思う。
6. 私は自分の指導する生徒たちが何を学ぶべきか理解している。
7. 私はさらに多くの英語の指導法を学びたいと思う。
8. 私は月数回にセミナーの参加は可能である(週1回程度)。
9. 私は他人の先生のレッスンを観察したい。
10. 私は自分のレッスンを見てもらいたい。

あなたの英語指導を向上させるためにどんなことが必要だと思いますか。  
質問、コメント等がある場合自由に書いて下さい。